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ABSTRACT

The third annual survey of the Illinois Rural Life Panel included questions on school taxes, improvements to strengthen local schools, satellite technology, extracurricular activities, and career opportunities after high school. Results from a sample of approximately 2,000 residents in the 76 Illinois nonmetropolitan counties included: (1) 54 percent reported at least one tax referendum in their school district during the past 5 years; (2) although most panelists (60 percent) believed that property tax increases do not improve education, more than half indicated a willingness to pay more to implement school improvements; (3) of panelists with children in school, 78 percent would send their children to the same school, if they had a choice; (4) 75 percent believed that increased local funding for schools would improve education (suggesting that panelists would be willing to support user fees and increases in taxes other than property taxes); (5) most believed school improvement requires more parental involvement, more reading and writing courses, and vocational courses for jobs that will be in demand; (6) there was a general lack of knowledge and understanding about the potential of satellite courses; (7) 67 percent would be willing to pay extra charges for their children to participate in extracurricular activities; (8) the most popular advice to children about career opportunities after high school included preparing for a professional career and seeking work in a company with a good training program; and (9) 29 percent would not recommend returning to their home town after college. Factors that influenced panel members' perceptions included how active they were in the school system, sex, age, education level, career, and salary. (LP)

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Illinois Rural Life Panel Summary Report
Volume 3, Issue 2 - July, 1992

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Illinois Rural Life Panel
Summary Report

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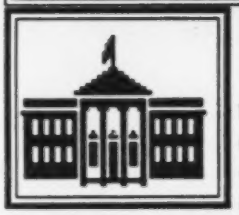
Education in Rural Illinois

Education reform and education funding are issues that affect nearly everyone. For parents and non-parents alike, the question of how (and how well) the public education system is funded has an undeniable impact on their pocketbooks. There are few topics of more interest to parents than the question of whether or not their children are receiving a quality education. Nowhere are these issues debated more hotly than in rural areas, for local education systems are under increasing pressure to improve the quality of education at a time when state and federal revenues are dwindling. Many rural school districts are saddled with the additional problem of a declining property tax base.

Members of the Illinois Rural Life Panel have been surveyed annually during the past three years about these and other education issues. The most recent survey (Spring, 1992) included questions on education and property taxes, improvements that would strengthen local schools, issues such as satellite technology and fees for extracurricular activities, and career opportunities after high school.

Education and Property Taxes



More than half (54 percent) of the Rural Life Panel Members said that there had been at least one tax referendum for their school district during the past five years; another 22 percent weren't sure. Only 21 percent of the respondents said that they believe that property tax increases result in any improvement in the education system, and 60 percent said that they do not improve the system. Among those panel members who had children and were active in school affairs (the group that would have the highest awareness of improvements in the school system) 35 percent believed that property taxes bring about improvements, and 53 percent said that property taxes do not improve the school system. Among those panel members with either children in school or who were active in school affairs (but not both), the comparable percentages were 23 percent and 64 percent, respectively. Those between the ages of 35 and 49, and those with incomes over $50,000 per year, were most likely to believe that increased property taxes result in a better education system.

In spite of the fact that most panelists believe that property tax increases do not improve the education system, more than half indicated a willingness to pay more to implement school improvements. As might be expected, those who had children in school were much more willing to pay more in increased property taxes; 63 percent of this group was willing to pay more property taxes compared to only 49 percent of those with no children in school. As is generally the case when taxpayers are asked about their willingness to pay for school reforms, older panel members were less willing to pay than younger panel members.

Cont'd. on page 2

What is the Illinois Rural Life Panel?

The Illinois Rural Life Panel is a sample of approximately 2,000 residents living in the 76 Illinois non-metropolitan counties. Members of the panel are considered "rural" residents, but only about one-fourth of them actually live on a farm or in the country, and only 13 percent are actively involved in farming. The majority live in small- to medium-sized towns, and none of the panel members live in a county that includes a city of 50,000 or more.

Panel members have been surveyed annually during the last three years about issues such as education, population declines, state issues, health care, and environmental concerns. The panel is a part of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs and is funded through a grant from the Illinois Lieutenant Governor's Office.

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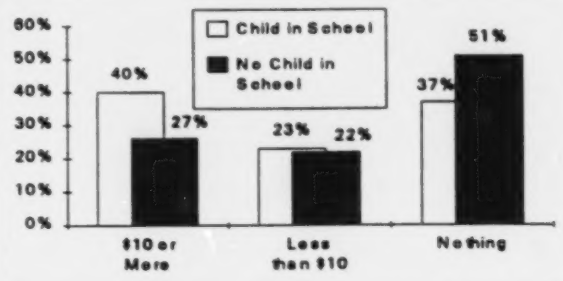
Education and Property Taxes *(cont'd.)*

Amount Willing to Pay Per Month in Increased Property Taxes To Implement School Reforms



What Would Improve or Strengthen Local Schools?

Of those panelists with children in school, 78 percent said that if they had a choice they would still send their children to the school they now attend. Those with incomes over $50,000 were more likely to be satisfied with their childrens' current school than those with incomes under $50,000. This possibly reflects the fact that those with higher incomes feel they have the option of sending their children to private schools, whether or not they actually do.

When asked which improvements would strengthen local schools, 75 percent of the panel members said that increased local funding for schools would improve education. This is in direct opposition to the claim by 60 percent of panelists that increased property taxes do not result in any improvement in the education system. The explanation for this contradiction, and one that has been supported by past tax studies, is that panel members are particularly opposed to increased property taxes. Panelists may be willing to support user fees and increases in taxes *other* than property taxes to improve the education system.

Panel members believe that more parental involvement, more reading and writing courses, and vocational courses for jobs that will be in demand would improve their local education system. They are less convinced that school consolidation, extension of the school year, or giving parents more choice in where children attend school would result in any improvements.

There has been much discussion recently about the "choice" option as a possible means to improve school systems. This option ranked dead last. It is quite conceivable that parents in rural areas do not perceive *any* choice as to where their children might attend school; realistically there is probably only one or at most two schools within commuting distance.

What Would Strengthen Local Schools?	Would Strengthen Local Schools (%)		
	A Lot	Some	Not At All
More parental involvement	64	33	3
Require more reading and writing courses	63	33	3
Teach vocational courses for jobs in demand	62	35	4
Require teachers to pass competency tests	58	34	8
Mandated tests for high school graduation	48	42	10
Give teachers and principals more control over students	48	38	14
Require more math and science courses	39	53	9
Vocational partnerships with businesses	38	55	8
Hire better trained teachers	35	53	12
Increase choice of courses in basic subjects	28	56	16
Increase local funding for education	28	48	25
Require more homework	25	52	23
Pay teachers higher salaries	19	46	34
More courses offered using satellite/TV system	12	57	31
Consolidate smaller schools in your area	20	37	43
Extend the school year	18	36	46
Give parents more choice in where children attend school	18	36	45

Several factors influenced a panel member's perception of which improvements would improve the educational system. Those who were active in the school system:

- were less likely to believe that requirements for more math and science courses or more vocational courses would improve the system.
- were less likely to favor giving teachers and principals more control over students.

- were more likely to favor giving a parents a choice of where their children go to school than those who were not involved in the school system.

- were twice as likely to report that higher salaries for teacher would help the educational system "a lot" (33 percent) than those who were not at all active (16 percent).

There were also differences in how men and women felt about possible improvements to the local school system:

- Men were slightly more likely than women to believe that vocational courses or vocational partnerships with businesses would improve the educational system.

- Men were more likely than women to believe that increased local funding of schools would help the school system.

- Women were more likely than men to believe that giving teachers and principals more control over students would improve the system.

More parental involvement, and emphasis on reading and writing skills, are seen as keys to local school improvements.

The education level of panelists also had an effect on how they viewed possible improvements to education:

- Panel members with more education were less likely to believe that giving parents a choice of where their children go to school would strengthen local schools.

- Respondents with a college degree were more likely to believe that increased local funding of schools would help the school system than those who did not attend college.

- Panelists with a high school education or less were more likely to believe that vocational course offerings would strengthen local schools than panelists with at least some higher education.

Alternative Course Delivery

One challenge regularly faced by many rural school districts is their inability to offer an acceptable range of vocational and college preparatory courses to high school students. It is frequently the incapacity of a school district to offer the necessary high school courses that leads to consolidation. In some small districts that have resisted consolidation, vocational courses and courses such as Physics or Calculus are either unavailable or taught by a teacher whose specialty is in another area. Some school districts have turned to satellite courses to meet their needs. Courses that could not otherwise be offered are transmitted by satellite to the local school, and students participate in the class through interactive TV.

According to the most recent survey, there is a general lack of knowledge and understanding about satellite courses. Half of the Rural Life Panel members, and more than a third of those with children in school, did not know if their local high school offers educational courses using satellite/TV technology. Of those who did know, 12 percent said that their local high school uses such technology and 38 percent said that it does not.

When asked if they would be willing to pay extra for their children to take additional satellite/TV courses that would not otherwise be available, a third said yes and a little less than half (48 percent) said no. Among those who were willing to pay for satellite courses, the mean amount parents were willing to pay was just over $26.00 per course.

These findings suggest that communication about the potential of satellite courses and the benefits they can offer students and rural school districts needs to be improved.

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities are another area that small school districts frequently have difficulty supporting. There is much more willingness among parents to pay for those activities that would be classified as "extra" as opposed to those activities that would be considered part of the general school curriculum. Although only 33 percent of rural parents are willing to pay for satellite courses, 67 percent say that they would be willing to pay extra charges for their children to participate in extracurricular activities. The percentage of panel members who said that participants should pay for extracurricular activities was 39 percent on both the 1989 and 1991 Rural Life Panel surveys.

Life After High School

Panelists were asked how they would advise their children or another young person about what they should do after high school. "Prepare for a professional career" and "look for work with a company that has a good program" were the two most popular choices. Options that less than half of the panel members would recommend included "find work in the local area," "start a local business," "start a business in another area," "seek work in a large city after high school," and "take any available job."

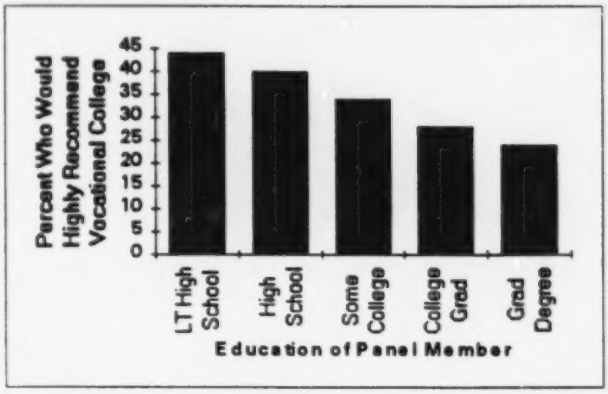
Although the choices that included "attend college" were ranked closely (5th and 6th), significantly more panel members said that they would not recommend returning to their home town after college (29 percent) than would not recommend looking for work in another area after college (16 percent). If the young person was to seek work directly out of high school, panel members were more likely to recommend that he or she seek work in the local area than in a large city.

Advice You Would Give to Your Children or Another Young Person About What They Should Do After High School (Percent)

	Highly Recommend	Would Recommend	Not Recommend
Prepare for a Professional Career	47	46	6
Look for work with a company that has a good training program	39	55	6
Learn a vocational skill in a community college	35	60	5
Get an apprenticeship in a trade	31	62	6
Attend college and work in another area	32	52	16
Attend college and return to home town	20	50	29
Continue with the family farm or business	14	58	28
Join the military	12	53	34
Find work in the local area	5	42	53
Start a local business	7	38	56
Start a business in another area	5	40	56
Seek work in a large city after high school	4	34	62
Take any available job	5	28	67

Men and women were generally in agreement on options they would recommend; there were no differences of more than five percentage points between men and women. There were some significant differences between educational levels, between age groups, and between those with children in school and those with no children in school.

Many of the differences can be explained by the fact that people tend to recommend those career options with which they are familiar. For example, panel members with a college degree were less likely to recommend that a young person learn a vocational skill than those with less education.



The age of panelists also affected which career options were recommended. The percentage who would highly recommend that a young person learn a vocational skill increased with age. Older panel members (especially those over age 65) were also more likely to recommend that a young person remain in a family business or that they take any available job. Panel members under age 50 were more likely to recommend that a young person start a business, either locally or elsewhere.

The recommendations that involved staying in the area vs. seeking work elsewhere are of particular interest since population losses in rural areas are a major concern. These population losses have included disproportionate numbers of the young and highly educated. However, there was little or no difference in the percentages of young or highly educated people who would recommend leaving the local area. Panelists with children in school were less likely to recommend work in the local area immediately after high school, and they were also less likely to recommend that their child or another young person continue with the family farm or business.

The ability of a rural community to educate its children, and to retain those children once they have completed their education, is vital to the community's future. Local education is a high priority for most rural Illinois residents; Rural Life Panel members have repeatedly indicated the desire that state funding for local education be maintained.

For additional information contact either the Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University or Community Research Services at Illinois State University.

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